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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BANGKOK 002778

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SUBJECT: SAMAK UNDERCUT FOR REELECTION AS THAI PM

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Classified By: Ambassador Eric G. John, reason: 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY AND COMMENT

11. (C) One day after the People's Power Party (PPP) decided to support former Prime Minister Samak Sundaravej for reelection as Prime Minister, leading PPP figures engineered a postponement (to September 17) of the vote. These PPP officials sought to buy time to persuade Samak that he should decline the opportunity to return to his former office. A close ally of Samak told the Ambassador he hoped Samak would step aside, but he was unsure what Samak would do. Former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra is reportedly helping from abroad to shape PPP's policies, although his influence may be waning, according to Thaksin loyalists. The Ambassador held a series of private meetings with PPP leaders on September 11 and 12 to get a readout on the PM selection process. He also continued to tell his interlocutors that the current political stalemate is an internal Thai matter, but it should be resolved in a peaceful and legal manner. Army Commander Anupong publicly expressed support for the idea of forming a government of national unity, according to media reporting.

12. (C) Comment: The political situation remains fluid; no single figure seems able to control events. We take at face value the accounts of Samak's determination to regain his former office, but we cannot predict how he will react to continued pressure from PPP factions and the party's coalition partners. Should Samak decide to step aside, it is unclear who would emerge to replace him. End Summary and Comment.

PPP OFFERS SAMAK SUPPORT...

13. (C) The Ambassador met separately on September 11 with two close allies of former Prime Minister Thaksin: former House Speaker Yongyuth Tiypairath, and former Transportation Minister Pongsak Ruktapongpisal. Both explained that a majority of People's Power Party (PPP) MPs preferred that former Prime Minister Samak Sundaravej not return to office. They viewed Samak as unable to lead Thailand effectively and unable to defuse the current crisis sparked by the People's Alliance for Democracy takeover of Government House. Samak

received significant support from Thaksin ally Newin Chidchob, however; Newin informally leads what most people estimate to be the largest faction within PPP, and his position appeared to prevail in intra-PPP deliberation on September 11.

¶4. (C) Despite this PPP determination to offer support for Samak's reelection, Yongyuth and former Thai Rak Thai Acting Party Leader Chaturon Chaiseng met with Samak for over two hours on September 11 to try to persuade him that he ought not to lead Thailand at this time. Yongyuth subsequently told the Ambassador that Samak repeatedly insisted he deserved to reprise his role as Prime Minister. (Note: Although the Constitutional Court recently determined Samak had to vacate office because he had violated a constitutional provision regarding conflicts of interest, that ruling did not bar Samak's reelection as PM. End Note.)

... THEN UNDERCUTS HIS REELECTION

¶5. (C) In a September 12 call on the Ambassador, Justice Minister (and PPP Deputy Leader) Sompong Amornwiwat explained that PPP felt duty-bound to offer support for Samak, who had played a critical role in founding the party in the wake of the dissolution of Thai Rak Thai. Sompong said Thai cultural norms made it extraordinarily difficult for the party to cast aside the man who had fought ardently for PPP from the party's birth, led it to victory in the 2007 election, and then headed the government for seven months. Samak was owed a measure of respect and should be given a face-saving way to step down.

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¶6. (C) Sompong lamented that, instead of using PPP's public show of support to gracefully step aside, Samak seemed determined to return as PM, even though PPP's coalition partners, the country's elite, and even members of Samak's own family preferred that someone else lead the government. Sompong explained that, in order to buy time for Samak to change his mind, Sompong and like-minded politicians were directing MPs from the governing coalition not to attend the House session scheduled to elect the Prime Minister. Sompong's efforts proved successful; lacking a quorum, the House leadership rescheduled the session for Wednesday, September 17.

¶7. (C) Sompong admitted that PPP could not wait too long to elect a new PM, however. He said that PPP's coalition partners were currently willing to defer to PPP to select its nominee as PM. Should this process prove drawn out, and a PPP leadership vacuum appear, the other parties' allegiance could waver.

SAMAK ALLY HOPES HE'LL STEP ASIDE

¶8. (C) The Ambassador met September 12 with Deputy Prime Minister Sahas Bunditkul, one of the few political figures who owes his primary allegiance to Samak rather than to Thaksin or other former Thai Rak Thai figures. Sahas explained Samak's perspective on the crisis, saying that it would be undemocratic (and a bad precedent) for PPP to allow the People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD) to push an elected leader out of office. Nevertheless, Sahas hoped that Samak would reconsider his decision and realize the time was not right for Samak to return as PM. Sahas said he could not predict what Samak would do, however.

THAKSIN'S ROLE

¶9. (C) The Ambassador's interlocutors indicated that former PM Thaksin, despite his flight to London and his public renunciation of politics, was involved in the deliberation

over PPP's selection of the next Prime Minister. Sompong claimed that he had spoken with Thaksin during the week of September 1-5, and Thaksin at that time expressed support for Samak because of Samak's role in founding the PPP. Pongsak told the Ambassador that Samak had recently phoned Thaksin to request his support, and Thaksin had pointed out the risks to PPP's popularity if Samak returned to office but deferred to Samak to make his own determination.

¶10. (C) Both Pongsak and Yongyuth told the Ambassador that they had been in contact with Thaksin on September 11. They claimed Thaksin was extremely frustrated with Samak's refusal to step aside, and that Thaksin had found he could not control Samak. According to Yongyuth, Thaksin was losing his influence in Thailand; his political network was deteriorating and he had significantly less money at his disposal to support his allies. Indeed, he sold his Manchester City Premier League soccer team in August because he was in desperate need of cash.

ARMY COMMANDER DISCUSSES NEW GOVERNMENT

¶11. (C) On September 11, Army Commander Anupong Paojinda, who has consistently said the Army would not intervene in political matters, told reporters that he considered the best solution to the current standoff to be the formation of a government of national unity (one including all political parties). He acknowledged, however, that such a government might prove difficult to form.

AMBASSADOR RESTATES USG POSITION

¶12. (C) The Ambassador continued to explain to his interlocutors that the USG viewed the resolution of the current standoff as an internal Thai matter. However, he

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stressed that any solution should be both peaceful and legal, and that the USG would oppose any effort to impose a solution incompatible with Thailand's constitution.
JOHN